



Consultant's view

PUT THE BIG ROCKS IN FIRST!

BY STEVE FEITH

My high school science teacher was a practical man. He had ways of making even the most complicated theories of the universe understandable to his students. He used simple models to explain the lessons. He recognized the need to uncomplicate things in order to learn.

One day, he carried in a large-mouthed mayonnaise jar, some baseball-sized rocks, some pea-sized gravel and some sugar-fine sand. He placed the jar where all could see and carefully placed as many large rocks inside as would fit. He then asked: "Is the jar full?" Expecting this to be a trick question, we all hesitated. Finally someone asked "Does the space between the rocks count?" He restated his question. So we answered, "No, there's still room left between the big rocks." That answer seemed to satisfy him—for the moment.

Next, he poured some gravel into the jar, shook it down, added more, shook it again and repeated until no more gravel would fit. Then he asked: "Is the jar full?" This time we responded quickly: "No, there's still space between the gravel." Again, he seemed satisfied that we were beginning to understand.

Now he began to pour in the fine sand. He shook and tapped the jar until it settled, and repeated this process until no more sand would fit. By now we were ready for his question—and in anticipation, we questioned him: "What about the small spaces between each grain of sand?" He just smiled.

Slowly he poured in some water, letting it seep down through the rocks, gravel and sand. He repeated the process until the jar was topped off with water. He indicated that the jar was now full unless we wanted to take a microscopic viewpoint regarding the space between water molecules. Now he posed the question: "What's the lesson learned here?"

We began to guess: "Does it have anything to do with gravity?" How about "Water seeks its own level?" Or "Rocks and sand won't dissolve in water?" Finally, we gave up.

He grinned and said: "If you don't put the big rocks in first, they won't fit!"

We all *know* that, but do we truly *understand* the implications? In business, do we practice this theory during planning and implementation?

Think back to when your organization started its latest initiative, to achieve anything from becoming "world-class" to "dominating your respective market." The single largest barrier to achieving success is often the reluctance to "put the big rocks in first."

The "big rocks" would be the vision that is shared by the whole organization, the mission that clearly defines what the employees came to work to do today and the business strategy that gives individuals sufficient understanding in order to make proper business decisions—for the customer and the company.

Most organizations have vision statements hanging in their lobbies. Most employees can tell you what product they make or service they deliver. Some even know their business drivers. However, too few leadership teams have effectively established the connection between the organization's vision, mission and strategy, and the employees' role in making it happen.

Has your organization made the connection?

Approach an employee during his or her normal workday and ask: "Would you explain what it is you are doing right now?" Assure the person that no mal-intent is intended. Listen carefully to the words used to answer this question. Do they answer in terms of activities and tasks, or a role?

Now ask, "Would you explain how *what* you are doing adds value for our customers?" This question usually draws a moment of silence while the employee thinks this through—maybe for the first time! He or she now has been forced to move from "job description thinking" to "role thinking." Even so, most employees, including members of management, will end with a rise in their voice as if to inquire, "Did I get it right?"

Why is this? And what does it have to do with the "big rocks" theory? Day-to-day activity is the gravel, sand and water in my professor's demonstration. It's the stuff we know how to do. It's what we get measured on. And when the world around us is in chaos from reorganizing, downsizing, and capsizing, it's these activities that we hold onto. They enable us to say, "Yes, I'm doing *my* job. It may be the wrong thing, but I'm doing it right!"

However, if employees, regardless of position in the organization, can't answer the second question quickly and succinctly—the "big rocks" question—then the leadership team may have failed to put the big rocks in first!

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